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Gender Mainstreaming

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As a strategy to promote gender equality, gender mainstreaming has received considerable attention worldwide. The language of gender mainstreaming has been quickly adopted (True and Mintrom 2001), which is why, in the beginning, many hopes were pinned on this strategy. Scholars have shown that gender mainstreaming has triggered organizational and procedural changes within state bureaucracies, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations. Gender equality units have been established, new policy tools have been introduced, and new procedures have been created. But feminist scholars also have shown that, all these changes notwithstanding, gender mainstreaming has not proven to be successful in achieving gender equality (cf. True and Parisi 2013). More than 15 years after the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, there are serious problems in translating the commitment into action. This is, as many scholars

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argue, not only a result of institutional and political resistance to substantially changing gender relations, but also a matter of conceptual clarity (Daly 2005; Lombardo and Meier 2006; Meier and Celis 2011; Subrahmanian 2004).

Reviewing the recent feminist literature, this essay focuses on both the conceptual and institutional dimensions as critical factors for the implementation of gender mainstreaming. I argue that political actors fail to define lucidly the goals of gender equality, which leaves room for interpretations and, consequently, results in divergent gender mainstreaming practices and policies. My purpose is to illustrate that gender mainstreaming is subject to "discursive politics" (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009) — that is, the politics of meaning-making — which is shaped by the institutional and cognitive context of organizations.

REFLECTIONS ON GENDER MAINSTREAMING: WHAT DOES THE LITERATURE SAY?

The paradox — the rapid global diffusion of gender mainstreaming as a key strategy for promoting gender equality and its failure to change substantially structures of inequality — has prompted feminist scholars to look for explanations. What are impediments to the *substantive* implementation of gender mainstreaming? The literature consists of theoretical reflections in regard to the feminist and transformative character of gender mainstreaming on the one hand and of case studies on mainstreaming practices in different policy areas on the other hand (cf. True and Parisi 2013). It suggests two dimensions that determine how gender mainstreaming is realized: first, the conceptual or discursive dimension together with the meaning that is attached to gender mainstreaming (i.e., Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009); and, second, the institutional dimension and the operations of power in mainstreaming practices (i.e., Prügl 2009; Prügl and Lustgarten 2006; Rai 2008; Woodward 2003; cf. True 2010). These dimensions are inextricably linked to one another.

Discursive Dimensions

There are many reasons for the wide acceptance of gender mainstreaming, one of which, ironically, is the lack of conceptual clarity: Gender mainstreaming can mean all things to all people. Scholars characterize it as "hollow" (Subrahmanian 2004, 90) or "elastic" (Daly 2005, 439). Definitions of gender mainstreaming vary (Squires 2005). Still, there are

some commonalities. Usually, definitions refer to gender mainstreaming as "the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action … in all areas and at all levels" (UN ECOSOC 1997/2). Moreover, definitions include the aim of "making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres …" (ibid.; cf. Council of Europe 1998, 15). Ultimately, definitions mostly articulate the goal to achieve gender equality. In a nutshell, such definitions convey that gender mainstreaming is about gender analysis and about incorporating a gendered perspective into all policies, programs, and projects.

None of the definitions, however, specifies what exactly gender equality is or what kind of equality is to be achieved. According to Squires (2005), is it equality of opportunity to be achieved through a strategy of "inclusion," equality of outcome to be achieved through a strategy of "reversal," or — as many feminists stress — a more transformative concept of equality that addresses institutionalized practices and norms that (re)produce gendered subjects and gender biases (through a strategy of "displacement")? The formal commitment to implement gender mainstreaming does not bind actors to realize gender equality in any specific way, which makes gender mainstreaming attractive to international organizations; adopting gender mainstreaming gives the appearance of "modernizing" public policies (Daly 2005, 440) without being committed to a clear agenda. It also gives rise to a technocratic interpretation of what gender mainstreaming is. Indeed, while there is a lack of clarity in regard to the content of gender mainstreaming policies, there is often considerable clarity in regard to the methods and instruments that are employed for the implementation of gender mainstreaming. Thus, Meier and Celis's (2011) analysis of Belgian gender mainstreaming policies since 1995 provides evidence of a strong technocratic bias; most gender mainstreaming approaches that were developed were formalistic and procedural in nature.

Some policy approaches offer openings for more substantive gender mainstreaming by compelling policy actors to define gender equality objectives and by requiring them to develop indicators for monitoring and evaluating the outcomes of their mainstreaming policies. Yet such requirements do not automatically lead to more substantive gender mainstreaming practices, as policy actors are often unable to define clearly gender equality goals due to a lack of expertise or simple

unwillingness (Benschop and Verloo 2006; Meier and Celis 2011). Thus, the political operationalization of gender equality rests on lay knowledge and normative — mostly conservative — assumptions about appropriate gender roles and gender relations (Caglar 2010). In practice, this translates into mainstreaming policies that are more integrative than transformative. Women's concerns are simply added to existing policies without fundamentally changing the policy frameworks from a feminist point of view (cf. True and Parisi 2013).

In fact, as feminist scholars show, the policy problem (gender inequality) that is to be solved is constructed and represented in different ways depending on the policy actors' interpretations of what the problem actually is (Bacchi 2008; Caglar 2010; Lombardo and Meier 2006). Accordingly, different meanings are assigned to gender mainstreaming, which explains the variety of policy approaches. Gender mainstreaming is — as Lombardo and Meier nicely put it — "an open signifier that can be filled with both feminist and non-feminist meanings" (ibid., 161). Feminist scholars involved in the European research projects MAGEEQ (Mainstreaming Gender Equality in Europe) and QUING (Quality in Gender Equality Policies) have identified different mechanisms of meaning-making or "discursive politics," namely shrinking, stretching, and bending (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009). They show how the meaning of gender equality, and, thus, of gender mainstreaming, is reduced to issues of non-discrimination or equal opportunities for women and men (for example, in the labor market); how it is broadened to issues of intersectionality; or how it is bent to fit other policy goals (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009, 3ff.).

As for the latter, there is ample evidence that gender mainstreaming has often been instrumentalized to meet other goals. For example, international development agencies, such as the World Bank, regard gender mainstreaming as a means to development rather than a means to gender equality (Moser and Moser 2005; Razavi 1998). Likewise, European Union (EU) gender mainstreaming policies are framed in ways that serve neoliberal labor market policy goals (see e.g., Stratigaki 2005; Wöhl 2007). In this case, family policy and issues of work/family reconciliation are put at the center targeting the activation and flexibility of women for the labor market. Here, gender mainstreaming becomes a flanking measure shoring up the neoliberal policy paradigm rather than a tool to transform gender relations. Framing gender mainstreaming in that way, however, reinforces traditional gender roles wherein women are the main caregivers (Lombardo and Meier 2006, 158).

Indeed, feminist scholars criticize that gender mainstreaming policies predominantly rest on heterosexist norms of gender relations (Bedford 2013), which is why women's roles as mothers and housewives are continuously reproduced (for the case of gender budgeting, see Caglar 2010). Such narrow understandings of gender roles and identities lead to mainstreaming policies that exclusively focus on women and situate problems of gender inequality within the continuum of sameness/difference or equal treatment/special treatment (Lombardo and Meier 2006; Squires 2005). Questions of gendered power relations are not taken into account. Furthermore, this dichotomous thinking ignores the ways in which gender inequality intersects with other inequalities, like those associated with class, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation (cf. True and Parisi 2013).

Processes of meaning-making are both intentional and unintentional. A certain meaning might be attached to gender mainstreaming unintentionally in the course of organization-specific discussions. But specific meanings might also be constructed intentionally either by political actors who are interested in depoliticizing and watering down the transformational potential of gender mainstreaming or by gender advocates who strategically frame issues of gender equality in order to ease resistance against gender mainstreaming within organizations (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2009, 6). This strategic framing, however, reinforces an integrationist approach to gender mainstreaming. Bearing this in mind, the question arises, is the right strategy to engage with state institutions? Can they be effective in advancing gender equality given their "embedded nature . . . in structures of inequality" (Rai 2008, 73)?

Institutional Dimensions

Gender mainstreaming seeks to change institutional structures, policy instruments, and priorities from a gender equality perspective. It does so by creating the conditions for institutional learning — for instance, by building up gender expertise within organizations (Moser and Moser 2005; Stratigaki 2005). The idea is to enable bureaucrats to reorganize institutional procedures and to redefine policy values in ways to achieve gender equality.

But empirical studies show that gender mainstreaming has not automatically triggered processes of socialization. Gender mainstreaming policies face strong administrative and institutional resistance. For the case of the EU, Stratigaki (2005) depicts how high- and middle-level

bureaucrats strategize against the implementation of gender mainstreaming, draft documents, change meanings, delegate power by removing or replacing officials, and exclude expert knowledge by discontinuing gender expert groups in different policy areas. Hafner-Burton and Pollack (2009) trace such institutional impediments back to the incentives set by organizations for the implementation of gender mainstreaming. They criticize the reliance on "soft incentives" (i.e., voluntary training) and argue that bureaucrats need to be encouraged to conform to the mainstreaming mandate through "hard incentives" (i.e., performance-oriented promotion or remuneration).

Some feminist scholars, however, doubt that the gendered nature of organizations can be escaped (i.e., Benschop and Verloo 2006). Their studies show the persistence of gendered power asymmetries in bureaucracies. These asymmetries take form not only in the under-representation of women in key positions, but also in implicit institutional rules that prescribe appropriate social behavior along gender lines. These rules determine whose claims are heard and which policy priorities are set. Prügl (2009, 178) distinguishes two types of rules: "rules of identity" and "rules of entitlement." Rules of identity are productive in a Foucaultian sense; they "produce performances of gender, sex and desire, hierarchical constructions of femininity and masculinity and definitions of hegemonic masculinity" and, thus, gendered agency. Rules of entitlements are more explicit; they "are often formulated as rights" and regulate the access to material and non-material resources. These rules become institutionally sedimented and constitute patriarchal rule (*Herrschaft*) in bureaucracies. As a consequence, a change of rules is — as Prügl emphasizes — a prerequisite for a change of patriarchal rule. This, however, is a matter of power struggles triggering diverse mechanisms, such as refusal, co-optation, empowerment, and normalization.

The aspect of new rules of identity plays a particularly important role in feminist analyses that draw on Foucault's governmentality framework; they regard gender mainstreaming as a technology of government, which produces certain kinds of gendered subjects (Bedford 2013; Phillips 2005; Wöhl 2008). These studies make an important contribution to the feminist literature on gender mainstreaming, as they shift the focus from the effects of power asymmetries within organizations on the implementation of gender mainstreaming to the power effects of mainstreaming practices themselves. Thus, gender mainstreaming is not just subject to power struggles, but also a technique of power.

CONCLUSION

The political climate toward gender equality policies has profoundly changed. Many feminists find themselves in situations where they have to defend commitments already made in the past. This is why they express a critical stance toward the idea of a fifth World Conference on Women in 2015; they fear a backtracking on commitments already made in Beijing.[1] In such a context of uncertainty, it is even more important to engage in discursive politics, to reflect critically, and to frame gender equality goals in a transformative manner.

For this purpose, further research with a special focus on feminist knowledge and gender expertise in organizations is needed. Knowledge is an important dimension of discursive politics; in order to understand the dynamics of discursive politics, it is pivotal to analyze processes of institutional knowledge production and to unfold different ways of knowing (e.g., normative, scientific, or everyday knowledge) in gender mainstreaming practices. What kinds of knowledge underlie understandings of gender equality? How do these kinds of knowledge become sedimented in institutions, and to what extent? How does gender expertise shape processes of knowledge generation within organizations? And to what extent does gender expertise contribute to a transformative understanding of gender mainstreaming? Focusing on these questions also implies — as Bacchi (2009) claims — critical reflection on the role of feminist scholars and their own practices of knowledge generation in the field of gender equality policies. Such an analysis reveals "feminist taboos" (Lombardo, Meier, and Verloo 2010) and current interpretative struggles, which significantly influence the discourse on gender mainstreaming.

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International Feminist Strategies: Strengths and Challenges of the Rights-Based Approach

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Claiming the rights of women in a world of blatant gender hierarchies is an international feminist strategy that has been around for a long time. Rhetorically, it has been part of the human rights framework since its very inception, as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 already contains important elements of gender equality, thanks to the lobbying efforts of a handful of women's rights advocates at the time. But it took the wave of global consciousness regarding gender inequality that swept the world in the 1970s to make women's rights relevant enough to codify them in a human rights treaty: the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). A decade and a half later, the Vienna Conference on Human Rights (1993) coined the slogan "women's rights are human rights" and thus emphasized the centrality of women's experiences for a holistic understanding of human rights. In the time since then, the human rights discourse has become increasingly intersectional and inclusive. While the scope and